

(Washington DC) This morning, Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC) Chair Grace Napolitano, CHC Civil Rights Task Force Chair Charlie Gonzalez and Congressman Xavier Becerra met with Attorney General Alberto Gonzales to discuss issues of importance to Latinos. Among the issues discussed were the Texas Redistricting Case recently heard by the Supreme Court, the pending reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act, and immigration legislation.

Reps. Napolitano, Gonzalez and Becerra spoke with Attorney General Gonzales about the letter the CHC sent last December regarding allegations that political appointees in the Department of Justice may have overruled its professional staff on the Delay redistricting plan. Moreover, the CHC expressed its concerns about the provisions of the VRA Congress must reauthorize by 2007.

"We had a productive meeting with the Attorney General and he listened intently to the concerns of the CHC," said Chairwoman Napolitano. "It is crucial that the VRA provisions be reauthorized to protect the rights of minority voters and ensure the integrity of our political process. If eligible voters cannot participate in the political process, then democracy cannot work. The VRA stands as a monument to those who laid down their lives for the right to vote."

"We thank the Attorney General for meeting with us and engaging in a dialogue on issues of importance to the CHC," said Congressman Gonzalez. "He heard our concerns that the preclearance process at DOJ may have been subverted for partisan ends. Moreover, we wanted to make the priorities of Latino families throughout America clear to the Bush Administration. In all, we spent a very productive 30 minutes with the Attorney General."

In December, a 2003 DOJ memo came to light, which alleged that high-level appointees at the Department approved the DeLay redistricting plan despite the unanimous opposition of DOJ's voting rights experts who rejected the controversial mid-cycle plan. Subsequently, DOJ political appointees overruled these experts and approved the redistricting plan.

The following VRA provisions are set to expire in 2007: Section 5 preclearance mandate, Section 203 minority language assistance, and authorization for the Attorney General to send

federal examiners and election observers to ensure that the VRA is being obeyed. Section 5 preclearance applies to States with a history of discriminating against minority voters and requires that the DOJ or the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia approve any redistricting plans. Section 203 requires that any jurisdictions with a significant number of limited-English-proficient voters make available oral and written bilingual assistance. Finally, the Attorney General can send federally empowered observers and examiners to protect the rights of minority citizens to register and vote without discrimination or intimidation.

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